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SUBJECT: THE SUMMER 2008 OLYMPICS THROUGH MALAYSIAN EYES

REF: STATE 105510

¶1. (U) This is Embassy Kuala Lumpur's response to action request in reftel.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Interviews with media professionals and comments from other contacts in Kuala Lumpur confirmed that the opulent pageantry and success of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing enjoyed a short-lived positive impact on Malaysian views of China, which was quickly overshadowed by the tainted milk-powder scandal that sparked off a health scare in Malaysia. In general, the Games did little to change perceptions of China in the eyes of Malaysians, mainly because China and Malaysia already enjoy close social cultural and economic ties, and most Malaysians feel that they have a good familiarity with China. Malaysians, according to our media and business interlocutors, generally do not perceive China as an economic threat, but rather as a &land of (business) opportunity8, though they do see it as a competitor for foreign direct investment.

¶3. (U) To gather the information for this report, Public Affairs spoke to several Malaysian news editors and journalists, including Norila Daud, President of the National Union of Journalists, the head of Radio 24 (Bernama), a News Editor from Nanyang Siang Pau, a reporter from the Oriental Daily, as well as a local contract Chinese-language news reader and translator. Poloff and FCSoff also contributed to this report.

¶4. (U) Of the news editors and reporters we spoke to, most said that their newspapers received a healthy amount of mail from readers on the subject of the Olympics, many praised the Chinese for the spectacular opening ceremony. However, beyond sports reporting, only a moderate number of editorials appeared in print dailies devoted to the topics of the Olympics, or of China during the period of the Games. Conversely, none of our political or commercial contacts have previously discussed this topic with us unless we raised it first.

¶5. (U) Malaysians, in general, took an interest in the Olympic Games, but because Malaysia's Olympic team was quite small, public attention to the Games was not widespread beyond the opening ceremonies and badminton. Sources consulted who are familiar with the Chinese-language press reported that the local Chinese Malaysian community (20% of the population) was extremely interested in the Games. Many elderly ethnic Chinese, some of whom migrated from China in the early 1940's, wrote to Chinese-language newspapers to express their pride in their &mother country8 because it did such a good job of hosting the Games.

¶6. (U) News media in Malaysia provided significant sports coverage of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Most papers sent reporters to Beijing, though they mainly interviewed Malaysian athletes. Local media definitely &sidelined8

environmental and human rights issues during the Games, which was attributed by one source to the excitement of the Games being hosted in Asia. Said source also commented that the lack of commentary or editorial reporting on human rights and environmental issues was less due to residual shine from the Games but more because Malaysia is concerned with the current global economic crisis and cautious of harming its relations with those countries (such as China) with whom it has important economic ties.

¶7. (U) Chinese language papers such as Chinese-language Oriental Daily published special editions on the Games. Many opinion writers and columnists from Chinese language press wrote about the Games, as well as about the Sichuan earthquake, Chinese nationalism, and the resurrection of the Middle Kingdom.⁸ The Oriental Daily, unlike its four competitors, did publish a few news stories on human rights protests that occurred around the Games. As a purely Malaysian Chinese newspaper -- other papers have stronger ties to Hong Kong and mainland China) the Oriental Daily was perhaps bolder in its coverage of human rights issues in China.

¶8. (U) In contrast, Malay language papers were more focused on whether Malaysian badminton star Lee Chong Wei would win Olympic gold. Local Malay papers covered Olympic sporting events daily, but editorials during the period of the games and following, tended to focus on topics internal to Malaysia. That being said, Malay papers did publish several side-articles on China outside the Olympic Village,⁸ as well as one or two reports on human rights demonstrations concurrent with the Games. By and large, however, coverage

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was focused on the Games themselves, and on Malaysia's chances for a gold medal in badminton. On television, Malaysia's main cable network, Astro, and national TV network, RTM1, covered the Beijing Olympics and provided daily medal tallies.

¶9. (U) Malaysian media professionals consulted said that China and Malaysia are very interconnected. Socially and economically, the two countries share ties going back generations, and economic ties in particular are said to have strengthened significantly since the 1990s, when the Sino-Malaysian relationship reached a new level of development with close cooperation and contacts in trade, tourism, education, culture, science and health. Our commercial contacts echoed this trend. There have been and are many exchanges of journalists between China and Malaysia, which means that those Malaysians who travel to China gain a realistic view of that country. Few Malaysians we spoke to were surprised that the Chinese were able to pull off such a successful Olympic Games.

¶10. (U) Economic competition from China is seen more with common sense than as a threat. China is one of the best markets for Malaysian products. Bilateral trade has been on an upward trend, growing 25% annually since 2002, and increasing to over 27.5 billion US dollars in 2006 from a little over 100 Million US dollars in 1974. Malaysians see China as a powerful country with good prospects and lots of business opportunities. Several Malaysian journalists commented that Malaysians are becoming increasingly aware that although much of China is still poor, living standards in some metropolitan areas in China are higher than Kuala Lumpur. As such, our commercial contacts had very little to say the Olympic games, as from their perspective they were still experiencing business as usual.

¶11. (U) Because media and politicians in Malaysia are quite familiar with China) many reporters and Members of Parliament have traveled to China on exchanges or reporting trips) the Summer Olympics are not seen to have changed views of China significantly, other than to have generated a healthy amount of Asian pride.⁸ However, the recent

tainted milk powder scandal has tended to cause local Malaysian media to take a more suspicious view of China once in their reporting due to the local health scare that has occurred from the multitude of Chinese-made food products sold in Malaysia.

¶12. (U) One source said that the Olympic Games should not be viewed as a single watershed event, but rather as one in a series of events. The year 2008 is an important one for those who watch China from Malaysia. First, China handled its Sichuan earthquake; second it successfully hosted the Olympics; third, it successfully launched the ShenZhou 7 manned spacecraft, and lastly, China grappled with a frightening food safety crisis that is still ongoing.

¶13. (U) In recent weeks, the tainted milk powder issue has obscured the short-lived fabulous images of Beijing fresh from the Summer Olympics. Now, in the eyes of the Malaysian media, China cannot be viewed entirely in a positive light as a global economic power until it shows it can implement product safety standards in line with international standards. Many are asking the question: are Chinese products really safe for human consumption? As in many countries around the world, Malaysian views of China shaped by the media are divided between images of China as a global economic and cultural powerhouse, and a China full of scofflaws and exploiters.

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